Esther Wells Smith c 1870
From the Wells Smith Family Album

Reflections

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This is Esther Wells Smith, my great-great-grandmother, photographed around the time of her marriage to John Lewis Smith in September 1870. The tintype has been mounted in a gilt card frame typical of the late 1860s, and though the picture is small—barely larger than a calling card—the clarity is striking. Her hands are folded neatly, her posture steady, and she manages to hold the faintest trace of a smile through what must have been a long exposure. Not an easy thing to do.

In this version, husband John has been cropped out; another photograph in the album shows the two of them together. Here, though, Esther stands on her own. It lets us meet her on her own terms—young, composed, newly married, standing at the threshold of the long pioneer life that would unfold in Elkton and the early settlements of Douglas County, Oregon.

She was born in Elkton in 1852, the daughter of Ira T. Wells and Anna Mandler Wells, both early settlers who came west in 1846 with the great wagon-train migration. Her mother had trained as a tailor in Prussia, and that lineage shows in the workmanship of Esther's plaid dress—the precise pleats, the ruffled trim, the fine stitching at the collar.

If this is indeed a wedding portrait, Esther would have been about eighteen. Within a few years she and John had their first child and were running a farm near Yoncalla. Decades later, after John's death, she operated the old Smith Ferry on the Umpqua River—a quiet but vital crossing later replaced by a bridge that once bore her name.

The very album that holds this photograph belonged to Esther herself. It is a remarkable record of early Oregon life—an intimate archive of faces, fashions, and histories that together tell the story of how one pioneering family took root and endured. There are many more pages yet to scan and describe, but this portrait is an apt beginning.

Esther Wells Smith c 1870

John Lewis Smith c 1870

Lewis Nolan Smith, infant, c 1871

John Lewis Smith copy c 1870
Original photograph likely late 1860s